

The Changing Opera Styles of Richard Strauss

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Preamble

- **I'm going to talk about the events which influenced the composition of seven operas of Richard Strauss, composed from 1905 to 1941, and explore changes in his musical style, illustrated by several video clips.**
- **The operas covered are Salome, Elektra, Rosenkavalier, Ariadne, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Arabella and Capriccio.**
- **Since I will be concentrating on musical style, I will not be discussing the synopsis of each opera.**
- **I will only describe the action in each video clip**
- **However, I have included complete synopses in the 'handouts' for your information.**

SALOME

- **In November 1902 Strauss attended a performance, in Berlin, of Max Reinhardt's production of Oscar Wilde's play, called "Salome". This was the germination of his next Opera. Strauss started composition on 27 July 1903, transforming Wilde's play into a libretto by cutting nearly half and removing much of the lengthy debates on religious and moral issues.**
- **However, other activities got in the way. He had many conducting commitments and the composition of a new 'Tone Poem' called "Sinfonia Domestica".**

- **Strauss then returned to the composition of 'Salome' and completed it in June 1905. The first performance occurred in Dresden, December 1905. Next to Rosenkavalier, it is the most performed opera of Richard Strauss today. It extends the 'Tone Poem', by acting out what the music is conveying. Never before had Strauss extended his musical language into such levels of dissonance.**
- **The intense emotions and often lurid narrative elicit a more daring and demanding musical language, full of extreme chromaticism and harsh timbres. The Oscar Wilde play is transformed and enhanced by the music of Richard Strauss, in all its obsessive detail. The first performance caused a furor. The first Salome, Marie Wittich, went on strike, saying 'I'm a decent woman'. Gustav Mahler wanted to produce it in Vienna but the censor obstructed it 'for religious and moral' reasons'.**

- In the opera, King Herod of Judaea has captured John the Baptist, called Jokanaan in the opera. Herod's young step daughter, Salome, demands to see the prisoner and is immediately infatuated with him and tries to kiss him. Jokanaan rejects her advances.
- Herod lusts over Salome and promises her anything, if she would dance for him. This she does, in the famous 'Dance of the Seven Veils'.
- Salome then demands the head of John the Baptist to be brought to her on a 'silver charger'.
- The video clip I've chosen is near the end of the opera when Salome holds the head in front of her, and mocks "You would not let me kiss your mouth, Jokanaan – well, I will kiss it now".
- This is five minutes you will not forget, an incredible performance by 36 year old Teresa Stratas in 1974.

ELEKTRA

- In October 1905 Richard Strauss attended a performance, in Berlin, of Max Reinhardt's production of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play, called "Elektra". He was so enthralled; he contacted Hofmannsthal and mentioned that he would like to set "Elektra" to music. Hofmannsthal replied in a letter, dated March 7, 1906:
- "My very dear Sir, How goes it with you and 'Elektra'? It is, I must say, the hope of no mean pleasure which you have so unexpectedly aroused in me. Will you let me know in a very few lines whether this hope may remain alive or is it to be buried?"
- Four days later Strauss replies: "Dear Herr von Hofmannsthal, I am as keen as ever on 'Elektra' and have already cut it down a good deal for my own private use."

- This was the start of a relationship which would last until Hofmannsthal's untimely death in 1929, and produce eight operas, with music written by Richard Strauss.
- In "Salome" the score works up to one set climax, the "Dance of the Seven Veils." In "Elektra" there also is a set composition. It is a summing up of emotions, in one eloquent burst of song, which occurs when Elektra recognizes her brother Orestes.
- It may be because it comes in the midst of so much cacophony that its effect is enhanced. But I think it is, not only one of Strauss's most spontaneous lyrical outpourings, but also one of the most beautiful I have ever heard. It is this section I have chosen to play for you today.

- In the opera, Elektra is distraught, almost to the point of madness, because her father, Agamemnon, whom she loves very much, has been murdered, many years earlier, by her mother Clytemnestra. Elektra, who had secured her younger brother Orestes in a foreign land, is hopeful that Orestes will now return to avenge his father.
- Starting with the cacophony associated with Elektra hearing that the person she was counting on, her brother Orestes, has been killed, and then seeing a stranger in the courtyard, this eight minute video clip will show how Strauss produces the most profoundly tender section of the whole opera. Elektra is fearful of the stranger until she recognizes her brother, alive and well. Leonie Rysanek's 1981 performance is magical.

ROSENKAVALIER

- Even before working on Elektra, Strauss was unsure that this was the right thing to do. In a letter to Hofmannsthal in March 1906 he asks for a different libretto, something based on Hofmannsthal's play 'Semiramis'. He writes, "**That is why I should be glad to know if you've got anything else in stock for me, and if I might perhaps have a go at some other subject from your pen, further removed from 'Salome', before doing 'Elektra'.**"
- However, Hofmannsthal replies with a very long letter, in his typical florid style, rejecting this notion, stating, "**But I honestly say that, as I see things, I should be very glad if you could manage to stick to 'Elektra' for a start.**" As we know, Strauss agreed, even reluctantly, and produced 'Elektra' with music unlike anything he had written before, now generally considered to be his most 'modern' work.

- 'Der Rosenkavalier' was the very next work composed by Strauss and it is so different from 'Elektra' that many people over the years have asked "Why?" Many expected Strauss to follow Schoenberg into the growing movement towards atonality and serial music. On hearing Rosenkavalier, Strauss was severely criticized by the musical elite of the time for retreating from the 'new' music, and producing a sentimental and sugary 'old fashioned' piece, which now is the most popular of his operas.
- I, too, always wondered "Why?" However, a little research reveals that Strauss trusted Hofmannsthal's judgment for the choice of libretto.
- Even while he was composing the music for 'Elektra', Strauss was pestering Hofmannsthal for 'anything new'.

- Finally, in a letter dated 11 February 1909, Hofmannsthal writes, “I have spent three quiet afternoons here drafting the full and entirely original scenario for an opera, full of burlesque situations and characters, with lively action, almost like a pantomime ... There are opportunities in it for lyrical passages, for fun and humor. ... It contains two big parts, one for baritone and another for a graceful girl dressed up as a man.”
- In a later philosophical letter, dated 8 March 1912, Hofmannsthal explains, “It was my deliberate intention which made me refrain from continuing the same direction after ‘Elektra’, just as I put the ‘Semiramis’ plot deliberately aside; for here as always I was obliged to pursue a line which is my own. To be your librettist in a higher sense, I had to begin by not being it in the banal sense.”

- So ‘Der Rosenkavalier’ is what it is! In 1962, I went to the Harvard Square Cinema, in Cambridge Massachusetts, to see ‘Der Rosenkavalier’, a film, in German and without subtitles, of a live performance from the 1960 Salzburg Festival.
- This was the event which launched me into a lifelong love of the operas of Richard Strauss.
- Today, I’ve chosen a 10 minute section from this movie, with English subtitles I’ve added, thanks to 21st Century technology. At the beginning of Act 2, Sophie von Faninal, just 15 and recently out of a convent, has been given in marriage by her father to Baron Ochs. Together with her duenna/chaperone, she awaits the arrival of Count Octavian Rofrano, just 17, who will present her with a Silver Rose, the traditional token of love from her intended husband.

- **Annaliese Rothenberger, who died last May, was known for her role as Sophie, one that is very hard to beat today. Notice how she plays the expectant giddy teenager, egged on by her duenna, Marianne, sung by Judith Hellwig, and then falls in love with Octavian, sung by Sena Jurinac, when their eyes meet during the presentation of the rose. You will have to read the synopsis of the opera to see how this turns out.**

ARIADNE

- **In a letter to Hofmannsthal, dated 17 March 1911, Strauss writes, “I am most anxious to hear what you have for me. Don’t forget: I’ve still no work for the summer. Writing symphonies doesn’t amuse me at all any longer. I hope you are well and working vigorously! Sincerely, Richard Strauss.”**
- **Hofmannsthal replies three days later. He writes, “About ‘Ariadne’, we must talk; it can, I believe, turn into something most charming. I am also inclined to think that this interim work is necessary ... to achieve something which brings us even closer together than ‘Rosenkavalier’ – which, as a fusion of word and music, satisfies me greatly.”**

- On 15 May 1911, Strauss is impatient and pestering Hofmannsthal again; **“I am waiting for you and am meanwhile torturing myself with a symphony (‘Alpensinfonie’) – a job that amuses me even less than chasing maybugs.”**
- Hofmannsthal replied immediately, proposing that Strauss’ opera ‘Ariadne auf Naxos’ be preceded by ‘A Comedy with Dances by Moliere arranged by Hugo von Hofmannsthal’, without any music.
- This first version of ‘Ariadne’ was performed this way, on 25 October 1912, in Stuttgart. It was a failure! It took time to fix and only after Hofmannsthal wrote, on 12 June 1913 **“Herewith a corrected copy of the new definitive Vorspiel for ‘Ariadne’; it is only since this has come into existence that I consider the whole ‘Ariadne’ completed.”**
- The revised version of ‘Ariadne auf Naxos’ premiered in Berlin on 1 November 1916, consisting of a Prologue and Opera, in one Act.

- This version is performed about as many times as Elektra and Arabella, two operas of widely different styles.
- “The richest man in Vienna” has commissioned a new opera, based on the Ariadne legend, to be performed for his guests after a sumptuous dinner. On the day of the performance, the Music Master, whose pupil composed the opera, is informed that the host has also arranged for a comedy, “The Inconstant Zerbinetta”, with ‘Commedia dell’Arte’ characters, to be performed after the opera. The Music Master protests vainly and desperately tries to find a way to convey this shocking news to the Composer. Unfortunately, there is a further change requested by the host.
- The first video clip explains this new request. The Haushofmeister or Major-domo is a speaking role, played by Nico Castel, a well known linguist and opera diction coach. The second video clip is from the Opera section, where Ariadne is played by Jessye Norman, singing seriously, only to be interrupted by the Commedia dell’Arte players, totally out of context.

DIE FRAU OHNE SCHATTEN

- After 'Der Rosenkavalier', Strauss was eager to get more librettos from Hofmannsthal. His pleading, in a letter dated 17 March 1911, causes Hofmannsthal to reply three days later,
- "... and 'if we were to work together once more on something big, it would have to possess colorful and clear cut action..... It is a magic fairy tale with two men confronting two women..... The whole idea, as I see it suspended before my eyes, would, incidentally, stand in the same relation to 'Die Zauberflote' as 'Rosenkavalier' does to 'Figaro' – not , in either case, an imitation, but bearing a certain analogy."
- This was to become 'Die Frau ohne Schatten'.

- Strauss did not concentrate on 'Frau ohne Schatten' until after the premiere of the second version of 'Ariadne' in 1916. He announced in a letter, dated 28 June 1917, "The full score of 'Frau ohne Schatten' is finished."
- However, the 'Great War' was raging and the premiere was delayed until 10 October 1919 in Vienna. The critics and the public liked it, but Strauss immediately realized that he had released it too early for Germany. The Dresden premiere was a disaster but as the years past, it did better. By 1923, it was a regular part of the repertoire.
- 'Frau ohne Schatten' is a long dark opera. Some say it is his best, a fairy tale just like 'Die Zauberflote'. However, I don't think it is balanced like the Mozart; where there is comic relief provided by the 'Papagano' character. Although the orchestral writing is some of the best ever written by Strauss, the opera calls for a 'Youthful Heldentenor', a 'Heldenbaritone', two 'Dramatic Sopranos' and a 'Dramatic Mezzo-soprano'.

- There are only two DVDs available, neither of which is satisfactory, due to the inconsistent voice quality of the characters. However, the 1991 audio recording, with Placido Domingo as the Emperor and Hidegard Behrens as Barak's wife, shows that the music in this opera can be breathtakingly beautiful.
- The plot of this opera is complex. Even before the opera begins, you should know the following.
- Once, when the Emperor of a southern eastern island was out hunting with his falcon, he pursued a white gazelle. As he was about to kill it, the gazelle assumed its original shape, that of the daughter of Keikobad, the ruler of the Spirit World.

- The Emperor fell in love with her and they have been happily married for almost twelve months, but for one sorrow, the Empress cannot bear children, since she is a woman without a shadow, the symbol of fertility. Keikobad has decreed that the Empress must cast a shadow before twelve months expires, or the Emperor will be turned into stone. When the opera begins there are only three days left of the twelve months. The details of the plot are covered in your handouts.
- I have chosen two video clips to illustrate both the beauty and the tension in this opera.
- First you will hear the Emperor's aria from Act 2, sung by Placido Domingo, when he thinks his wife is deceiving him. He is distraught and pleads to the falcon "**Lead me to the desolate rocky cleft where neither man nor beast can hear my lament**", accompanied by the sumptuous sound of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Georg Solti in a 1991 audio recording.

- The second clip is when the Empress refuses to drink the 'water of life', which would buy her a shadow from Barak's wife, even though it means sacrificing her husband, the Emperor.
- Of course Keikobad doesn't let this happen, and, everything works out OK.
- Cheryl Studer is the Empress in this 1992 Salzburg Festival performance, with the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, again conducted by Sir Georg Solti.

ARABELLA

- On 20 September 1927, Strauss writes to Hofmannsthal, "**The Strauss Week in Frankfurt, concluding with 'Frau ohne Schatten' on 28 August, was a great success. Six full houses! But now I have no work; completely cleaned out! So please, write some poetry. It may even be a 'second Rosenkavalier' if you can't think of anything better.**"
- On 1 October 1927, Hofmannsthal replies, "**Two years ago I occupied myself with a comedy, made notes and drafted a scenario..... Last night it occurred to me that this comedy might perhaps be done for music, with a text in light vein, largely in telegram style. The first act – as far as I recollect – will do; the second will be particularly suitable; it takes place in a ballroom and offers enchanting possibilities.**" This was the germination of 'Arabella'.
- However, it was a very rough road for this opera. Throughout 1928 there were numerous letters between Strauss and Hofmannsthal.

- Strauss received the first draft of the libretto on 3 March 1928, and the 'completed' Act 1 on 24 June 1928.
- But on the 7 November 1928 he is very upset. He writes to Hofmannsthal, **“‘Arabella’ doesn’t even begin to come to music and, to be perfectly frank, the characters don’t interest me in the least; neither the Croatian (Mandryka), nor, above all, the principal character Arabella, who does not experience the slightest psychological conflicts throughout the three acts.”**
- Hofmannsthal concurs in a letter dated 24 December 1928 and agrees to make substantial changes to Act 1, if necessary, after reviewing Acts 2 and 3. Strauss invited Hofmannsthal to have lunch at his home in Vienna on 29 December, to hear a reading of the whole libretto of ‘Arabella’.

- On 14 July 1929, Strauss sent a telegram to Hofmannsthal, **“First act excellent. Many thanks and congratulations!”** However, Hofmannsthal never read it – he died the same day.
- Strauss made no further changes to the libretto and worked on the music, stylistically very similar to ‘Rosenkavalier’, completing it on 12 October 1932. The premiere took place on 1 July 1933 in Dresden.
- I have chosen two video clips. The first is in Act 1, where Arabella explains to her sister Zdenka that there will be ‘A Right Man’ for her. Renee Fleming is ‘Arabella’ and Julia Kleiter is Zdenka from this 2007 performance in Zurich.
- The second video selection is from the beginning of Act 2, where Mandryka proposes to Arabella and she accepts. Gundula Janowitz sings Arabella and Berdt Wiek is Mandryka from this 1977 performance in Vienna

CAPRICCIO

- The death of Hugo von Hofmannsthal was a savage blow to Strauss. He wrote to Hofmannsthal's widow, **"No musician ever found such a helper and supporter. No one will ever replace him for me or the world of music."**
- However, Strauss continued to compose operas throughout this Nazi period, 1933-1945, but only 'Daphne' (1938) and Capriccio (1941) have been produced, but only rarely, by the large Opera companies in Europe, The MET has not produced 'Daphne' and there has been only 6 performances of 'Capriccio', which premiered at this house on 1 September 1998.

- Strauss received some ideas for operas from Stefan Zweig in 1934. One that interested Strauss was a libretto Zweig had found in the British Museum. It was by the Abbe Giambattista Casti, called **"Prima la musica e poi le parole" – "First the music and then the words"**.
- This libretto had already been set to music by Salieri and performed in Vienna in 1786. This was the genesis of 'Capriccio', but Strauss didn't start composing until he found Clemens Krauss, the conductor, to help him with the libretto, during 1940 and 1941. The first performance took place on 26 October 1942 in Munich.
- I have concluded, after reading the letters between Strauss and Hofmannsthal, that Strauss felt that the music was more important and Hofmannsthal thought the opposite. They had arguments, even over the precise cover page wording for Rosenkavalier.

- Hofmannsthal proposed ‘Burlesque Opera in 3 Acts by Hugo von Hofmannsthal or ‘Comedy for Music in 3 Acts by Hugo von Hofmannsthal - Music by Richard Strauss’. The second choice was accepted by Strauss.
- The theme of ‘Capriccio’ can be summarized as **"Which is more important: words or music?"** This question is dramatized in the story of a Countess torn between two suitors: Olivier, a poet, and Flamand, a composer. Olivier writes a beautiful sonnet and recites it to Countess Madeleine as his declaration of love. Madeleine is moved to tears by its beauty.
- Flamand then takes the sonnet, sets it to music and sings it to Madeleine, as his declaration of love. The Countess’ doesn’t know who to choose between her ardent suitors. On hearing Flamand sing so beautifully, she underlines the enigma of Casti’s original title. **“Music evokes the feelings which cry out for words – words bring out the emotions which crave sound and music”**. It is this section I have chosen to illustrate in the video clip.

- Of course, there is much more in ‘Capriccio’ and I leave you to read through the synopsis in your handouts, and hopefully you will be able to attend the HD transmission from the MET this season, with Renee Fleming in the title role.
- Kiri te Kanawa is the Countess, Simon Keenlyside is Olivier, the poet, and David Kuebler is Flamand, the composer, in this 1993 live telecast from the San Francisco Opera, conducted by Donald Runnicles.